ARTICLE APPEARED ON PAGE A-1

WASHINGTON POST
28 July 1985

Andropov Rushed Renewal Into Motion

POWER IN THE KREMLIN
FROM BREZHNEV TO GORBACHEV

By Dusko Doder
Washington Post Foreign Service

MOSCOW—It all began and ended in the Arctic cold.

On a frigid November day in 1982, Yuri Andropov was facing the country for the first time as its new leader. The northern wind blew in stinging gusts across Red Square as he performed initiation rites facing the coffin of his predecessor, Leonid Brezhnev. His voice was clear and decisive. His bearing seemed to project hopes that the future was bright.

Fifteen months later it was Andropov's own coffin that rolled along the same vast square shimmering in the pale sunlight on a windswept February morning. And the question many thoughtful people asked at the time was whether Andropov's brief tenure as Kremlin leader would turn out to be a mere footnote in Soviet history books or one of its main chapters.

It was difficult to pass judgment on his administration on that freezing February day in 1984. In mourning him, the Russians seemed to mourn the potentially irretrievable loss of the new departures that he had promised and that had briefly offered a chance of moving the ossified Soviet system into a new era.

In retrospect, however, Andropov's 15 months in power marked a turning point in recent Soviet history. It left a lasting impact that his immediate successor, Konstantin Chernenko, could not undo. Ultimately, it created the basis of the current mood of optimism and activism that has sustained the 4½-month-old administration of the new Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev.

When Chernenko died in March 1985, Gorbachev became the heir and executor of the Andropov legacy. Without the Andropov interlude, Gorbachev would not have been able to consolidate his power so quickly and move so forcefully in his efforts at national reconstruction.

The Soviet Union is a country of unfulfilled potential, a country constantly hoping for a chance for a new beginning. During the past four years, it has lived through a period of uncertainty and groping, yet one that also eventually yielded a potentially crucial political transition—from Brezhnev to Andropov to Chernenko to Gorbachev—

For this correspondent, who has spent almost seven of the past 17 years as a reporter in this country, it is still necessary to concede just how little one really knows about it. But in a country that treats information as a privilege to be distributed on a need-to-know basis, the truth is difficult to know, and outsiders can only approach it by piecing together and analyzing bits of information.

The tragic, coarse, brutal and at the same time human and delicate aspects of Russia have always struck me as almost biblical. Now, after the deaths of three leaders in three years, there are renewed hopes here for a new beginning. The chance seems to exist. Whether it will be seized or not remains to be seen.

That Andropov's brief tenure is proving to be the crucial turning point seems all the more remarkable since he was seriously ill for much of those 15 months. His kidneys collapsed four months into his administration, and he had to use a dialysis machine at least twice a week.

In late September 1983 his condition suddenly became so grave that he had to be hospitalized. In October, doctors removed one of his ailing kidneys, and from that point on, a high official recalled in a conversation, Andropov was restricted to a specially equipped apartment inside the government hospital at Kuntsevo, not far from his Moscow home, always attached to the dialysis machine.

Rule by Remote Control

And yet, he continued to run the country as if by remote control, the official noted. Only members of his family, close political associates, key personal aides and Gorbachev, the youngest member of the Politburo and his favorite, had access to the Kuntsevo hospital apartment that winter.

Continued

Everything had been done to fix the apartment in a way that would permit Andropov to forget that he was inside a hospital. He was constantly on the phone. When he called senior officials in for talks, he would greet them in his living room, wearing a soft house robe and seated in a comfortable armchair. A battery of phones was nearby.

Andropov had good days and bad days. On a bad day "his voice was weak," recalled an official who had known Andropov for nearly three decades. "It was in December, and when we finished discussing business at hand and I was about to leave, he got up from his armchair and embraced me. He did so as if he knew that we were seeing each other for the last time, and I was tremendously shaken and saddened. But then I talked to him by phone two weeks later and his voice was firm and cheerful and I thought, well, he was going to recover."

At the end of January 1984, Andropov's condition deteriorated sharply. In the first days of February he lapsed into a coma, never to regain consciousness. The phone calls stopped.

The government came to a standstill. Pavel Laptiev and two other close personal aides moved into the Kuntsevo apartment. Andropov died on Feb. 10 as his latest protege, Yegor Ligachev, was making his first speech as a Central Committee secretary.

When the death was announced the next day, it came as a surprise for the vast majority of Soviet citizens. As Andropov's health was deteriorating in the two previous months, the government's propaganda machinery had moved into high gear, creating an illusion that the leader was more active than ever.

The initial shock turned into widespread depression when it was announced that Konstantin Chernenko, 71 at the time, was elected the new general secretary of the Communist Party, the country's most powerful post.

Chernenko was not only older than Andropov and obviously in poor health, but he also was intimately connected to the Brezhnev "mafia" that had run the country for 18 years and had ushered in the time of decline and despondency at the start of the 1980s.

Was it a return to the Brezhnev era? What was to become of the hopes for national reconstruction that Andropov had raised?

Looking back, one can see why Andropov's brief tenure marked a turning point.

First, Andropov pushed Gorbachev to the fore and placed into the leadership a group of younger men who brought with them the ideas of national reconstruction and reform that had been percolating under the surface of Brezhnev's last years of inactivity. These men had had to wait on the sidelines for far too long while a complacent Brezhnev administration had ignored the signs of a gathering crisis.

In moving them up, Andropov brought about a real generational change.

The second point was more fundamental and hence more important.

For more than six decades the Soviets have lived in a propaganda paradise. For a long time, the utopian notions that served as part of the vision of the communist future guiding the elite had seemed attainable. But the old belief that Russia was riding the crest of history had been supplanted by a widespread feeling here during Brezhnev's last years that communism everywhere was in retreat and the Americans everywhere on the march.

Nothing else illuminates so obviously the discrepancy between utopian ideological constraints and reality as does the Communist Party program, which is supposed to be the bible of the Soviet party and which was adopted in 1961.

By the end of the 1970s, the program asserts, the Soviet state and economy would be so advanced that the population would be ensured an abundance of everything.

By the end of 1970s, the program specifies, among other things, there was to be so much food that all workers would be fed free of charge at factory restaurants; schoolchildren and students would get free clothing and books; all Soviet citizens would enjoy rent-free housing; water, gas and heating would be free, as would all transportation; all citizens would have two months of paid vacation per year; and, needless to say, such things as medical and other essential services would be free.

The program, in short, promised a paradise on Earth. For the farmers of Kazakhstan who did not read party documents, the promise was summarized by Nikita Khrushchev. By 1980, he said, the Soviet Union would "overtake America" in everything—food, wealth, comfort, industrial strength.

By the early 1970s, it had become all too apparent that the program's pledges were in the realm of fantasy. At the beginning of the 1980s, however, the gap between the verbiage and the reality had become intolerable. Most people knew it, yet the utopian rhetoric continued, as if by inertia.

A series of internal and external problems produced a deep crisis in Soviet society and deepened the feeling of gloom in its elite: the war in Afghanistan, the Polish crisis, Brezhnev's protracted illness that immobilized the government, the declining rates of industrial growth, repeated agricultural disasters and food shortages, widespread corruption and drunkenness, to name a few.

The authorities sought to put up a brave front to obscure public discontent and the loss of optimism and confidence. Yet it seemed all too clear that Soviet society was ready for changes.

The KGB Significance

Much has been made of the fact that Andropov served for 15 years as chairman of the KGB, the Soviet secret police. In the West, the KGB is associated with espionage and suppression of internal dissent, both accurate images. There is undoubtedly a cruel side to Andropov, who masterminded the destruction of the dissident movement here.

He took over as KGB chairman at a time when the dissident movement was gaining momentum, with many prominent Soviet personalities from the scientific and cultural communities joining in demands for greater liberalization. By the time he left the job, most prominent dissidents had been either forced into exile, such as Alexander Solzhenitsyn, or tried and sentenced. Some were placed in psychiatric hospitals while a few, such as physicist Andrei Sakharov, were sent into internal exile.

In its efforts to destroy the dissident movement, the KGB sought to prevent any form of organized opposition and to remove its prominent spokesmen. That left the movement without a sense of direction or leaders to rally around.

Here, however, the KGB is also regarded as an elite organization, the guardian of the Soviet system, an outfit that has been recruiting the best and the brightest young men and women. The job not only gave Andropov the best available information about the country and the world, but it also provided him with the aura of authority that Russians respect.

The image of the secret police as an all-knowing and all-powerful instrument of oppression is deeply imbedded in the Russian psyche. A friend recalled a remark by Andropov in 1967 that illustrates the point. Andropov was a secretary of the Central Committee at the time, one of the 21 top officials who run the Soviet Union, and he had just been appointed KGB chairman. As they walked together past the KGB headquarters on Moscow's Dzerzhinsky Square, his friend recalled, Andropov said: "All my life I have been walking past this building with a feeling of unease and awkwardness. Imagine, I'm going to become its boss."

The KGB reputation gave Andropov an image within the country of strength and firmness. As national leader he held out a promise of hope. The very picture of the new leader taking charge as smoothly and naturally as if he had been groomed for it all his life could not but create a surge of optimism.

What he told the people was hardly new—indeed the whole country was aware of the chasm between Soviet rhetoric and the reality. What was dramatically new was that the Kremlin leader himself was telling it without sugarcoating.

In doing so, he seemed determined to create a picture of purpose and resolve. Strict disciplinary measures were combined with appeals to logic and reason, the latter suggesting that intelligence was finally being applied to national business.

Many of the party's objectives, he said, had failed "the test of time." Many of its enshrined goals were unjustified and some contained "elements of separation from reality." The economy was being run on a trial-and-error basis, which was "irrational."

After 65 years of Soviet power, a Kremlin leader was telling the nation that the economy and society were seriously weakened, and that this feebleness was the result in large measure of the absence of rational understanding and rational direction.

"Frankly speaking," Andropov said, "we have not yet studied properly the society in which we live and work, and we have not yet fully discovered the laws governing its development, especially economic laws."

For a communist elite that was supposed to know the future and that claimed to be running the country on "scientific principles" of Marxism-Leninism, these were staggering admissions.

His aim, Andropov said, was to sort things out and bring order to the nation's existing social and industrial capacities. Then, he said, it would be necessary to make changes in "planning, management and the economic mechanism," or, in effect, in the entire system.

"I do not have a recipe," he said. But the country was ill prepared for a highly competitive future and "now we must make up for what we have lost."

Frightening the Bureaucrats

Not everyone was happy, however.

When one speaks of changes in the Soviet economy, it must be kept in mind that one is talking about the entire society. All Soviet citizens work for the state. A huge and strictly hierarchical bureaucracy presides over this edifice, the world's second-largest economy.

One of the hallmarks of Brezhnev's 18 years in power was stability. As he grew older, Brezhnev was increasingly reluctant to make personnel changes and felt comfortable only with the old, familiar faces. Top officials had acquired lifetime job security. For example, there were no changes in the composition of the Central Committee for the last 10 years of Brezhnev's life.

Given the hierarchical nature of authority, this also meant almost automatic job security for countless officials at the middle and lower levels of the bureaucracy. This produced an enormous resistance to changes, so that Andropov's tenure was marked by a covert political struggle not only along generational lines but also between an established and largely corrupt machinery impervious to reforms and a coalition of younger and better educated sections of the elite who favored national reconstruction.

But it would be a gross oversimplification to assume that only the corrupt elements of party bureaucracy were opposed to Andropov. Many orthodox communists feared systemic changes on grounds that, once initiated, they could acquire an uncontrollable life of their own. The question here was whether the party could hold the society together to make changes smoothly enough, particularly while confronted with President Reagan's rearmament program and Moscow's extended commitments to communist allies and various clients throughout the world.

The fact that Andropov openly confronted the party and country with the existing realities changed the tone of public debate. But the entrenched opposition was lying in wait, publicly agreeing with the new policy course but covertly speculating about how long the ailing leader would last.

The coalition for change led by Andropov included powerful groups in the society. Among them were technocrats, younger people in general, some senior officials who had become increasingly concerned about the feebleness of the economy, and the KGB.

Andropov must have known just how intractable the system was. In a one-party state, the new leader inherits the entrenched apparat of his predecessor. Only gradually can he bring in his own people, only cautiously can he challenge the sacred privileges of a bureaucracy wholly identified with the ruling party.

Looking back again, it seems remarkable how fast Andropov moved on all these fronts.

The men who run the country today are all Andropov's men. He singled out Gorbachev as his heir-apparent. All others were completely unknown only two years ago. Ligachev, who is now second in command, had been a provincial leader in Siberia for 18 years. Nikolai Ryzhkov, Vitali Vorotnikov and Viktor Chebrikov were so obscure that not even knowledgeable Soviet analysts knew who they were.

While there were relatively few changes at the top, at other levels the pace was quick. Hundreds of persons who held real power either in Moscow or in the provinces were removed. Thousands of middle-echelon officials were replaced or shifted to other duties.

Continued

A Focus on Corruption

In the struggle against the bureaucracy, Andropov seized on the issue of corruption. Members of Brezhnev's entourage and some close relatives had become involved in various corruption scandals and the feeling of political and social disgust in the country was fueling demands for change.

Apart from KGB reports, Andropov could witness manifestations of corruption and misuse of power almost daily.

An ascetic figure, for the last 16 years of his life he lived with his wife in a one-bedroom apartment on the sixth floor of a massive building at Kutuzovsky Prospekt 26. The apartment, consisting of a kitchen, dining room, living room and bedroom, comprised a total space of less than 900 square feet. He also had the use of a two-story *dacha* at Barikha, outside Moscow, whose living space was roughly equal to that of an average center-hall colonial house in Washington.

A few floors under Andropov's Moscow apartment lived Brezhnev, whose palatial apartment occupied the entire floor of the building, and Brezhnev's crony and interior minister, Nikolai Shchelokov, whose apartment was equally grand. Even distant relatives of these and other high officials drove Mercedes-Benz cars and had built palatial *dachas* at Barikha—at government expense.

Friends of Andropov say that even while he was in the KGB he had on several occasions expressed his anger and disgust over the elite's corruption. As Soviet leader, he used the issue to force personnel changes. The bureaucracy was deathly frightened of this gaunt and withdrawn man, assuming that he knew everything about each official from KGB files.

And yet these people could be replaced only gradually, since they were the mainstay of the party and the basis of the system. It was a difficult issue, and Andropov must have been aware of the magnitude of the task.

Before his kidneys gave out in February 1983, Andropov had met with a prominent Soviet novelist for a private conversation. "He told me that doctors were giving him about five years to live," the novelist recalled later. "But he said the things he wanted to do would require at least 10 years of work."

Once he became seriously ill, Andropov gave the impression of a man in a hurry. His speeches became bolder and more direct, and he announced that a comprehensive blueprint for economic changes would have to be completed in two years, or before the end of 1985.

At the same time, he initiated the most far-reaching internal economic debate among economists, managers, scientists, Central Committee experts and officials to determine the course of these changes. In his speeches he seemed to favor a new pricing system, fiscal incentives, reducing the authority of the state planning committee, and measures to "provide scope for individual and local initiatives." The trend was in the direction of market socialism.

The debate abated when he was hospitalized in September 1983 and no clear blueprint emerged from it. As he conducted business from the Kuntsevo hospital, he seemed to focus almost entirely on the personnel issue, sensing that he had only a short time to live.

He had seen the hidden dangers facing a leader seeking to make radical changes while he worked as a Central Committee secretary, first for Khrushchev and later for Brezhnev. Khrushchev was ousted when he precipitously initiated changes that threatened bureaucratic privileges but failed to put his men in key positions. Alexei Kosygin's reforms in 1965 died a slow death in the bowels of the bureaucracy while a passive Brezhnev waited on the sidelines and used the failure to consolidate his preeminence.

By focusing on the personnel changes and advancing young and energetic people who were building their careers, he was hoping that his strategy would be carried out by the new generation.

At the end of December 1983, he made Chebrikov an alternate Politburo member and pushed Vorotnikov and Mikhail Solomentsev to full membership. He had prepared a speech for the Central Committee but could not deliver it himself.

The last section of that speech, even at that time, seemed like his political testament. The course had been set, he said. "We have raised people's expectation." It was the duty of all Central Committee members to stay the course, he said, in what was almost an appeal to them.

Although his health was a state secret, and even Central Committee members did not know much about it, the word had filtered out that Andropov's days were numbered. His opponents were waiting.

A remark by a 74-year-old Central Committee member in January 1984 illuminates this point. "What's all this about Andropov?" he said with evident contempt to some young people at a wedding party. "He is just an old, sick man."